Brutal Thrill-Kill Slaughter Fests:

Video Games and Moral Panic from 1992 to 2009

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Submitted in part fulfilment of the Honours degree in Journalism, Media and Communications – The University of Tasmania, June 2010

Contents

Introduction

Studies of moral panics in Australia range from drug panics in the suburbs of Melbourne (Rowe 2007) to Vietnamese-Australians contesting their portrayal in the media as perpetrators of crime (Dreher 2007). However, *Outrageous!* (2007) the book that houses these studies along with fifteen others, and claims to be the first book of Australian moral panics (Poynting and Morgan 2007: 1), is curiously short on studies of moral panics relating to violent media concerns. Not one of the seventeen studies looks at a violent media connected moral panic. Australia has never been short of violent media-related moral panics, especially since the 1980s began. There are studies for most of those moral panic episodes: video nasties, metal music and devil worshiping Dungeons and Dragons players. Each of these enjoys a wide range of research, including from the Australian perspective. However, one media moral panic that is underrepresented in moral panic studies is that of violent video games. Despite a vigorous episode in the 1990s and resurgences of concern in the 21st century, not much attention has been payed to these episodes of anxieties over the violence in games. Researches in regards to this issue are mostly psychological or sociological studies attempting to prove or disprove the link between violence in games and violent behaviour (e.g. Griffiths 1999, Dill and Dill 1998, Anderson 2004 and Anderson and Bushman 2001). There are only a couple of existing studies of moral panics surrounding video game[1]

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[1] Although in the 1990s video games are distinguished from computer games, due to the use of differing hardware, this paper uses video game and computer game interchangeably because both are equally the subject of concerns over violence.

violence. Ferguson (2008) and Sternheimer (2007) have both looked at how a moral panic over the connection of video games to school shootings has been constructed, and Dwyer and Stockbridge (1999) have approached it in relation to Australia's new media policy decisions. However most studies tend to assume a moral panic happened – even Dwyer and Stockbridge are somewhat guilty of this, along with Lumby (1997) among others. So this study aims to place itself in the gap that has arisen in the studies of violent media related moral panics, by focusing on these episodes of moral panic in Australia over violence in computer games.

Focussing on news coverage in the *Herald Sun* newspaper, one episode is during the era between 1992 and 1996 during which the classification of games began. 1997 misses out by virtue of having no articles about the evils of computer game violence, so only serves to illustrate the abrupt ending of the brief resurgence in moral panic in 1996. The next period that is considered is that of the first decade of the 21st century, running from 2001 to 2009 when video games were again the subject of concern. This study looks at news coverage only, avoiding letters to the editor and reviews, on the issue of video games and violence and the connection with violent behaviour. These articles were retrieved from online databases. This means that the study gets to concentrate on the text.

This study makes a number of key arguments. Beginning with the period that runs from 1992 to 1996, this thesis argues that during this period, concern was heightened and resulted in a moral panic on the issue of violence in video games and its potential effect on children. This moral panic, it is argued, follows the moral of Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2002). The criteria that Goode and Ben-Yehuda point out as being necessary to indicate that there is a moral panic are all met. There is heightened concern, a consensus on the legitimacy of that concern, there is hostility towards violent video games, the response is seen to be disproportionate and

the moral panics over games and violence in this period exhibit volatility. It is also argued that this period of moral panics is also marked by games, gamers and game violence being constructed in a certain way. Games are constructed as youthful toys, gamers are perceived as children and teenagers and violent games are seen a dreadful corrupters of the young. Finally for this period it is argued that the model of the 'wheel' of moral panic that Ferguson (2008) shares can be useful in studying other similar moral panics as is demonstrated by its use here, which shows it works just fine as a conceptual aid.

For the later period between 2001 and 2009, it is argued that in contrast to earlier periods no moral panic occurred. Even though there is concern over violence in video games, similar to that of the 1990s, and that the concerns are certainly raised in a volatile manner, the events fail to satisfy all of Goode and Ben-Yehuda's (2002) criteria. The criteria of consensus, disproportionality and hostility have not been satisfied. In answer to this it is then argued that even though there is some hint of a McRobbie and Thornton (1995) moral panic, due to the active contestation of attacks on violent video games by pro game lobbying groups such as entertainment software advocates and the publishers and producers of games themselves. However they may be seen as a bit too efficient in that none of the events that appear as a beginning to a moral panic ever seem to get off the ground. Although this can be attributed in some part to the effects of lobby groups, it is also argued that there has been a significant change in the discourses surrounding games, gamers and games violence between the 1990s and the 2000s. This shift in the discourse, it is argued, has constructed games as an adult entertainment product, gamers as adult consumers and violence in games as a legitimate consumer choice for adults. This, it is argued, has also had an impact on the effectiveness of attacks on violent video games, since it is hard to get a panic off the ground when you target

the entertainment habits of adults, as long as that they are not blatantly perverted. So they are the key arguments that I have made in this project.

In my analysis of the major fields of moral panic study, I have concentrated on a few of the major moral panic theorists. Cohen (2002, originally 1972), Hall et al (1978), Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2002, originally 1994) and McRobbie and Thornton (1995), this was informed in part by *Outrageous!* and its collection of Australian moral panic studies – since these are the theorists that the authors of the studies in the book rely on. Since Cohen (2002), theories of moral panics have been continually adapted and revised to deal with a changing world or perspective. Hall et al (1978), revise Cohen (2002) to argue that moral panics are engineered by an elite to serve the interests of the powers that be. Goode and Ben- Yehuda (2002) revise Cohen (2002) to move on from a process model of moral panics to a model that relies on criteria that *indicate* the presence of a moral panic. They also incorporate Hall et al (1978), with their descriptions of three theories of moral panic, by including the elite engineered model with the grass-roots model and the interest-group theory to create a comprehensive collection of interpretation possibilities. These in turn are revised by McRobbie and Thornton (1995) who argue that moral panics have to be revised in light of the increase in media, with its corresponding increase in audience fragmentation, thus the idea of a society as a whole getting in the grip of a panic can no longer apply. They also argue for the existence of moral panic language being used ironically in news reporting, the increase in advocacy groups and the almost daily and routine nature of rapid moral panics complicating the neater picture of older moral panic theories. Finally, I use Ferguson (2008) and Sternheim's (2007) idea of a relation between the media, producers of alarmist research and politicians working together, sometimes unintentionally, to produce a moral panic.

In terms of the methodology in use in this study, discourse analysis is used in its most basic sense. The *Herald Sun* employs discourses surrounding games, gamers and violence in games and those can be used to understand differences in the reporting on violent video games.

For this study, articles were searched for on digital databases: NewsText for the 1990s material and Australian New Zealand Reference Centre for the material of the 2000s. Articles were searched for using key terms and variations to achieve as complete a selection of articles as possible. These were analysed to see which (if any) model of moral panic fitted in each period, and also to discover how games, gamers and violence in games, were constructed in the two periods. In light of several limitations and weaknesses, some space was dedicated to answering the questions of reliability and so forth in regard to the use of online databases (see methodology).

In regards to the content of each section – the literature review contains an overview of the theories that it is felt underpin the conceptions of moral panic that are used. Beginning with Cohen (2002), and then moving on to discuss the theories and revision of Hall et al (1978), who are followed by the extensive revision of Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2002), in turn completely revised in light of a new world of fragmented mass media by McRobbie and Thornton (1995). Following this some other general examples of the application of moral panic theory to cases similar to the one that is the focus of this study and an explanation of where this research fits in the body of literature.

The Methodology contains a brief explanation of how discourse analysis is to be applied to this project, a description of the methodology followed in organising the articles used for the study. The case study of the 1990s period follows this and frames Goode and Ben-Yehuda's concept of moral panic within the themes that are used to describe the discourses of the

period. The Case study of the 2000s contains an analysis of the failure of a moral panic to appear, and suggests reasons. Finally the conclusion offers a summary, and then presents some avenues for future research that might further what has been developed in this study.

Literature Review

> "Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folklore and collective memory; at other times it has a more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way the society conceives itself" (Cohen 2002: 1).

The concept of moral panics was initially popularised by the work of Stanley Cohen. In his *Folk Devils and Moral Panics,* Cohen examines the phenomena of the Mods and Rockers and their connection to violent disturbances at English seaside resorts (2002: 10). This work investigates how the behaviour of the Mods and Rockers was discussed in the mass media (2002: 8). Cohen explains the concept of moral panic as a process akin to that of a disaster, a model he adopted after noticing similarities in the description of the phases of disasters in research and the events that he studied (2002: 11). Taking a condensed version of a sequence designed to describe a typical disaster, Cohen regarded moral panics as taking place as a

series of stages (2002: 12). This series of: Warning, or apprehensions based on conditions from hence danger may arise; Impact, where the disaster strikes, or the danger is made real; Inventory, during which responses are formulated, expert opinions solicited and the community polled; and Reaction, whereupon action is taken to alleviate the danger, provided a process and theory for explaining a moral panic (2002: 12-13). To Cohen, a moral panic is distinguished by how it develops along these stages as evidenced in, "press clippings and other media sources" (Drotner 1999: 597). Cohen's early work has been taken up and adapted or extended by other theorists in both the social and media studies disciplines.

One approach has been that of Hall and others (1978) in *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*. In this approach, Hall *et al.* examined the moral panic over mugging by predominately black youth in England as a hegemonic exercise on the behalf of the ruling classes. This left wing Marxist approach sought to explain moral panics as an attempt by the ruling classes to understand their response to the 'mugging crisis' as the only commonsense one and so legitimise it, no matter how unnecessary it may have been. By getting the community to accept the idea of an out of control black youth population, it allowed the government the *power* to control them (the youth) in the manner they wished:

> "We have tried ... to pose and answer questions about how complex ideologies of crime provide the basis, in certain moments, for cross-class alliances in support of 'authority'" (Hall, *et al* 1978: 177)

Hall *et al*, offer an alternative to Cohen's concept of moral panics being somewhat spontaneously developed by the media or as the work of 'moral entrepreneurs' (Cohen 2002:

8) with their theory of panics as engineered by social elites. However this is not the only way in which moral panics have been re-conceptualised.

Another major revision of moral panics is in Goode and Ben-Yehuda's *Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance* (2002). Goode and Ben-Yehuda look at moral panic not as a series of defined stages, but rather, as being *indicated* by a list of criteria. These criteria – concern, hostility, consensus, disproportionality and volatility – need to be demonstrated objectively by evidence (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2002: 33-41). This might be news articles and current affairs broadcasts indicating the presence of concern, consensus being indicated by polls demonstrating that the issue is important to a majority of people and volatility could be indicated by news coverage on the issue that suddenly appears and disappears. This emphasis on objective evidence to support the indicators, and the advent of using indicators in the first place may come partially from Goode and Ben-Yehuda's response to Waddington's (1986) attack on Hall *et al.* and their conception of the 1970s mugging as a moral panic. Goode and Ben-Yehuda note that Waddington objects to the use of the concept of moral panics as it is impossible to determine the proportionality of a response (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2002: 42). Their response appears to be to emphasise the criteria of disproportionality and to maintain that it is possible to objectively decide what is disproportionate and thus indicative of a moral panic (2002: 43-45). Cohen (2002) himself also points out a weakness in his own work that Goode and Ben-Yehuda answer with their criteria.

> "Why, thus, does rate X of condition Y generate a moral panic in one country but not in another with the same condition?" (2002: xxii)

Sometimes, he points out, significant and horrible events can be denied or ignored. In such cases no moral panic emerges. So to distinguish a moral panic he points to a clearer description of the concept of moral panic that distinguishes more clearly the elements in his original definition. These are Goode and Ben-Yehuda's five criteria (2002: xxii).

Goode and Ben-Yehuda also elaborate on three theories on the emergence of moral panics. They examine this in regard to the *origin* of moral panics, pointing first at a 'grassroots model' (2002: 127-134) where concern emanates from widespread concern in the general public. They also look at the idea of an 'elite-engineered model' (2002: 135-138) whereupon an elite group will actively create a moral panic in the interest of furthering their own power. Lastly they examine the "most common approach" 'Interest group theory' (2002: 138-143) which is sometimes compatible with the grassroots theory, but often contradicts the elite-engineered model (2002: 139). This because moral panics are originating from 'moral entrepreneurs' whose concerns may become those of the general populace but are often independent from elite interests. These conceptions of moral panics however are still traditional in the sense that the disproportionality is in regards to the response, as well as the level of concern and that volatility means a rise and fall in concern. The panics are also primarily disseminated through the actions of the mass media. Now that communications are easier with the internet and the news media itself has become wise to the term 'moral panic' (the use of the term in British national press rose from eight in 1991 to eighty-nine in 1993 (Hunt 1997: 630)) and Thompson's (1998) observation that moral panics are succeeding each other more rapidly and it is harder to distinguish them (1998: 2), perhaps another adaption of moral panics is necessary to deal with these changes.

McRobbie and Thornton (1995) offer their ideas on the development and future of moral panics in 'Rethinking 'moral panic' for multi-mediated social worlds'. In her own book *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*, Thornton (1995) introduced the idea that subcultural groups *welcome* a moral panic in the mass media regarding their activities. She give the example of acid house's attempt to create interest in the mass media by predicting moral panics in album sleeve notes (1995: 131) and in the music press (1995: 132), and when the story was picked up by the mainstream press, the subcultural press "gloried in the sensational excess" (1995: 134). Positive reporting basically ruins the *authenticity* of a subculture, putting it in danger of being aborted, and while negative press is disparaged, it is also something aspired to, something that increases their publicity (1995: 135). This concept is returned to in McRobbie and Thornton's (1995) text on moral panics. They note that the actions of youth engaging with the mass media in this way have been ignored by Cohen and Hall *et al.* (and though not mentioned, Goode and Ben-Yehuda also neglect this). For youth, "Moral panic can therefore be seen as a culmination and fulfilment of youth cultural agendas in so far as negative news coverage baptizes transgression" (McRobbie and Thornton 1995: 565). However perhaps a more important contribution to the scholarship of moral panics is how they have adapted the concept of moral panic to the specificities of the contemporary mass media.

There are four concepts in particular that McRobbie and Thornton have introduced to the concept of moral panics: a change in pace in the construction of moral panics; moral panics as a 'front line' in an ideological battle; the mobilisation of interest groups; and the media's ironic and self knowing use of moral panic discourses. In the first case McRobbie and Thornton say in regards to the inadequacy of Cohen's theory that moral panics occur 'every now and then':

> "They are a standard response, a familiar, sometimes weary, even ridiculous rhetoric rather than an exceptional emergency intervention. Used by politicians to orchestrate consent, by business to promote sales in certain niche markets, and by media to make home and social affairs newsworthy, moral panics are constructed on a daily basis" (McRobbie and Thornton 1995: 560).

Cohen agrees that such a revision of the original idea of spasmodic moral panics is necessary, but objects to the idea that they occur on a 'daily basis'; the unexpected and the anomalous happen and cannot always be integrated into a daily event (Cohen 2002: xxxi). However, the conception of 'daily' moral panics is still sound, despite this. That there might be anomalous events does not detract from the need to be able to examine moral panics as daily phenomena. McRobbie and Thornton's conception of moral panics as a 'front line' (1995: 564) comes from their citation of the work of Watney (1987) on the way in which some groups are not constructed as 'folk devils' but are already the subject of 'monstrous' representations (McRobbie and Thornton 1995: 563). Thus moral panics can operate as an intensification of the ideological battle to contest those representations (1995: 564). The mobilisation of interest groups is another large part of McRobbie and Thornton's revision. The presence of "interest groups, pressure groups, lobbies and campaigning experts [that] are mobilized to intervene in moral panics" (1995: 566) work in concert with the idea that in a complex society the social body as a whole will be gripped by fear is no longer useful due to the way in which specialist magazines and papers has fragmented the audience and provide dissenting views (1995: 568). This fragmentation and utilisation of self owned spaces for dissent is reflected in the rise of access to the internet, though this is not specifically mentioned by McRobbie and Thornton, where dissent, fragmentation and organisation have become easier

than in any previous period, in part due to the proliferation of new sources of information (Poynting and Morgan 2007: 5). Finally the way in which some papers provide a 'tongue in cheek' or 'ironic' use of moral panic language and style, points to a genre of moral panic writing in the media in which "mixtures of outrage and amusement point to the 'entertainment value' of moral panics" (1995: 570). These revisions allow the use of the model of moral panic that takes into account the way in which the concept has penetrated the news media's consciousness and the way in which the proliferation of media has fragmented audiences and strengthened alternate points of views.

When concepts of moral panic have been applied in the academic literature, the subject of a moral panic study is often a group of people: a group of rioting young men as in Cohen (2002), youthful black muggers in London in Hall *et al.* (1978) or witches as in Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994). However moral panics can be about more than 'deviant' youth. For example Stockwell (2006) argues that *objects* such as guns or movies can be the subject of a moral panic. This "reflects the shift of moral panic theory out of sociology and into media theory" (Stockwell 2006: 131).

A substantial number of studies have explored these media-related moral panics. Most have focused on the panics over media content and the effect on young people. Usually at the advent of any new media form or distribution method, a panic arises with fears of children's access to violent and/or pornographic material that is often assumed to have an impact on their minds. In particular, there have been several moral panic episodes that occurred across the English speaking world. In the 1950s there were panics over horror comics, inflamed by the psychiatrist Frederic Wertham and his book *Seduction of the Innocent* (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009: 10, Moore 2004: 4). Beyond that, the 1980s were gripped in a multitude of

moral panics, especially about violence in the media. There were 'video nasties' (Dwyer and Stockbridge 1999, Jenkins 1992, Critcher 2009 and Lusted 1983), dangerous 'metal' music with a large body of research (Wright 2000, Weinstein 2000 and Walser 1993) and devil worshipping Dungeons and Dragons players (Martin and Fine 1991, Jenkins and Maier-Katkin 1992 and Waldron 2005).

After this period the 1990s saw a moral panic related to the rise in home gaming systems and concerns over violence in the video games being sold. The threat of legislation moved the video game industry in the United States to begin a regime of self regulation (Kiline 2007: 182), whereas in Australia it led to legislation bringing the classification of games in line with movies up to the classification of MA15+ (Dwyer and Stockbridge 1999). However while the other media-related moral panics mentioned above have quite an extensive body of studies, video game moral panics have been the subject of only a relatively small number of studies. The connection between games and violent behaviour is extensively researched as evidenced by the large number of psychological studies performed so far (e.g. Griffiths 1999, Dill and Dill 1998, Anderson 2004 and Anderson and Bushman 2001). However, when it comes to analysis of the moral panic surrounding video game violence, there is only a small amount of research. Some that engage with the issue, like Dwyer and Stockbridge (1999), only do so minimally because they are primarily concerned with addressing government responses to concerns about violence since 1983, in terms of inquiries and action. The following two studies however engage a bit more deeply and offer useful tools for studying game related moral panics. Ferguson's (2008) study of moral panics surrounding violent videogames, adapts Guantlett's (1995) ideas on how moral panics originate into a flow chart that he uses to examine how politicians, the media and interested social scientists can interact to create a moral panic within the general populace. In Figure 1 he illustrates his theory on this point.

"In this model, 'societal beliefs', which may include 'commonsense notions', moral beliefs, religious beliefs, scientific dogma, and other beliefs, essentially 'spin the wheel' of moral panic. The populace begins to become concerned about something, in this case the media (although other issues such as immigration, race, homosexuality, etc., could also apply to this model), particularly something that is new, foreign, or alien. It may be more likely that societal 'elders' who are particularly unfamiliar with a new media technology, and perhaps wary of youth rebelliousness against the social order, are often the progenitors of a panic" (Ferguson 2008: 31).

Social scientists feed into the 'wheel' by emphasising media research that supports the fear about video game violence at the expense of research that demonstrates the opposite and the news media reports more on the research that supports the fear. Politicians in turn use this to justify clamping down on the reason for the fear, justifying it due to the presence of supporting evidence in the news media providing by co-operating social scientists. Though it should be noted that sometimes this may only be the result of social scientists trying to make an ideological point, their research is then picked up by news media organisations with the reason that research that points to fears being real are more news worthy that research that claims there is nothing wrong. This in turn is appropriated by politicians to support an ideological platform (Ferguson 2008: 30).

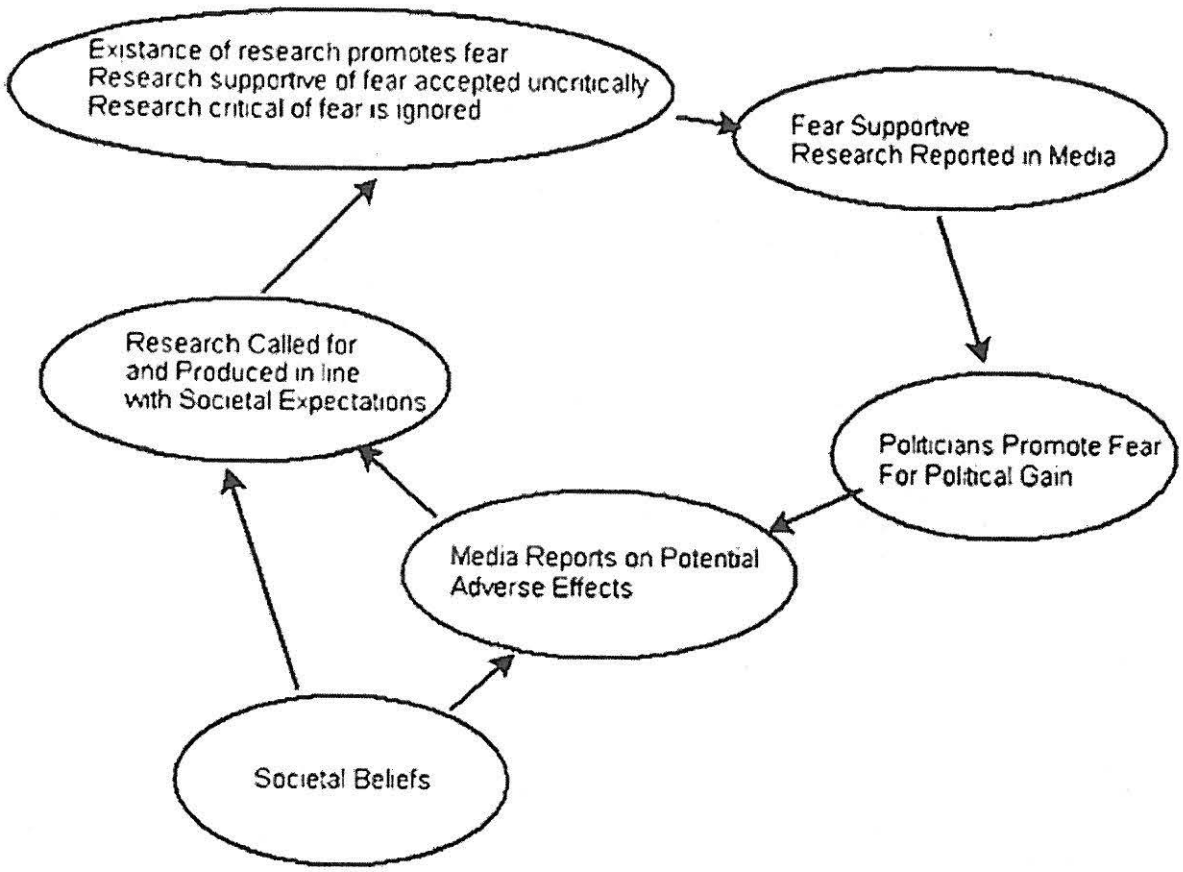

Figure 1. The moral panic wheel (Ferguson 2008: 31).

Sternheimer (2007) also discussed the mechanisms by which the news media, politicians and sociologists have created moral panics around video games. It is not only politicians that blame games for acts of violence, Sternheimer also sees the news media as playing a part in "constructing culpability" as they often, in the wake of a shooting, use games as a central explanation when the perpetrators are middle class white youth (2007: 14). Added to this is how the news media does its reporting on research. Instead of reporting the studies that show that other extenuating circumstances are far more important in influencing a shooter, the news media overwhelmingly concentrates on the link to violent video games often mentioning studies where the link is a very weak correlation and no more (2007: 15).

Reporters are also "missing media studies" (2007: 16). They ignore other research on the meaning-making process of those that consume media. These factors contribute to the false sense of the strength of the link between violence in video games and violent behaviour that allows politicians to advocate harsher punishments in order to be seen as tough on crime in a way that enforces the idea of black youth as simply dangerous, while white middle class youth are the victims of their media consumption (2007: 17).

Moral panics in Australia, which this paper will be focusing on, have also been broadly covered. *Outrageous! Moral panics in Australia* (2007), a collection of seventeen studies into contemporary and historical moral panics situated in Australia nonetheless devotes no articles to media-related moral panics. However it does show a remarkable devotion to traditional conceptions of moral panic, like the ones given in this chapter from Rowe's (2007) use of Cohen (1972) to examine the moral panic over heroin in Melbourne to the use of McRobbie and Thornton (1995) by Dreher (2007) to look at how a local Vietnamese-Australians contested depictions of Vietnamese-Australians as perpetuators of crime. As already noted, Dwyer and Stockbridge (1999) look at a period of moral panic over games; this period was the early 1990s period in Australia. They do not however, attempt to model this moral panic, but only draw attention to its existence so as to discuss the government's response. That there was actually a moral panic is assumed in their study. This study also looks at the controversies surrounding video games in the early 1990s as well as the period between 2001 and 2009. However it will not seek to apply any one particular 'theory' to both these periods. Rather, following Goode (2000), and using the concept that "There is no moral panics 'theory'. The moral panic is a sociological phenomenon" (2000: 551) each period will be explained by what moral panic conception it is felt best describes the moral panics of that period, or indeed, the periods will be examined to determine if a moral panic did not occur.

Researching the periods of anxiety over video games in Australia is how this study will place itself in the existing body of research. As evidenced, the research on moral panics in Australia has either not considered the concerns over violence in games that this thesis will study, or have assumed that what occurred was a moral panic. Following that, media texts will be studied for indicators of moral panic and discourse analysis will be applied to expose the discourses that surround games, gamers and game violence in order to discover what differences might exist in the news coverage of the two periods. The choice of using discourse analysis as a method is informed by Critcher's (2006) and Thompson's (1998) call for greater use of discourse analysis in moral panic studies. In particular, Thompson thought discourse analyses useful for "decoding of signifying practices" (1998: 58) through which moral panics is constituted. To explain how discourse analysis shall be utilised in the case studies of the two periods, a methodology follows.

Methodology

Discourse is "an institutionalised way of talking that regulates and reinforces action and thereby exerts power" (Link 1983, cited Jäger and Maier 2009: 35) Since they belong to institutions, generally, an analysis of discourse "sheds light on the power relations in society with respect to that institution" (Weerakkody 2009:273). Discourses are 'regulatory' in that a discourse "defines and produces the objects of our knowledge (Lê and Lê 2009: 5).

It is in this sense that discourse analysis shall be used to discover how the newspaper, as the empowered creator of the discourses that inhabit news texts, defines and produces, or constructs, the objects of games, gamers and violence in games. Differences in the discourses between periods can then be used to help explain differences in the reporting on violent video game reporting between the two periods.

The focus of analysis was the Herald Sun; this was chosen because since the study is to be focused on Australian experiences, and that it is felt that the scope has to be kept from becoming too broad, a single newspaper had to be selected, from which articles covering the concerns with violent video games, were gathered. To choose the newspaper, two factors were considered: One was that the newspaper be the sort that would typically engage with moral panics, such as a paper that engages in 'tabloid' style reporting as opposed to the typically more measured copy of the broadsheet newspapers. The herald Sun is also the highest circulating weekday newspaper (Audit Bureau of Circulations 2009). Articles were drawn from the two periods mentioned in the previous chapter: The period between 1992 and 1996 and the period between 2001 and 2009.

Hard copies of the *Herald Sun* are not available, so to gather articles from the two periods, two digital databases were used. For the period of the early 1990s, articles were taken from the News Limited database NewsText, and the articles from the 21st century were taken from the Australian New Zealand Reference Centre. To gather the articles, each database was searched using the following terms: video/computer game(s) violent/violence and video/computer game(s) classification. These articles were examined for recurring names of games or people that might be searched so as to make sure that any articles on the same issue that may have been missed could then be integrated into the collection of news texts. These searches were performed. Any new articles discovered during this search were added to the collection. Any articles that were letters to the editor or reviews of games were discarded. Pieces that were editorial, opinion or news were kept. This decision was made to simplify the context to within news stories, since letters to the editor would add an unnecessary layer of complexity and revues for games would side step most controversial issues without adding any depth if they did happen to mention concerns over violence in games.

These articles were examined for common themes that occur through both periods. This examination resulted in the identification of the following themes: 'violence link', 'R-rating', 'actions of government officials' and 'computer game proponents'. Through these themes, how a moral panic was constituted will be considered, as well as how games, gamers, and game violence are discursively constructed in the news coverage. To analyse whether the coverage supports the existence of a moral panic, supporting statements within the text of the articles will be used. These will be contextualised by other information if needed. To analyse how games, gamers and game violence are discursively constructed within the coverage of each period, words, statements and the contexts of entire articles were analysed for dominant linguistic features that point towards particular discourses.

This examination of the discourses surrounding video games, players and violence has drawn inspiration from a critical discourse analysis performed by Nairn and Coverdale on the imputations of madness in the reportage of a massacre in New Zealand. In 'Breakfast and then Death', Nairn and Coverdale (2006) used a method to reference articles that broke their articles down into a notation that indicated page, paragraph and sentence. For the purposes of this research, which draws on a wide range of articles from many years, it was felt that using a similar notation (but changed to reflect the circumstances) would be useful. So the articles addressed here are referenced by year, number in chronological order for stories published that year and paragraph number or headline. So the second paragraph from the third story from 2008, 'No longer child's play', is referenced in the text as [08.3.2].

The articles and their reference are as follows:

Chronological: [year. number. paragraph]

For the period between 1992 and 1996:

[92.1.] = Call to curb video game violence

[93.1.] = Video toy link to violence

[93.2.] = Censor video games call

[93.3.] = Violent video games ban bid

[93.4.] = Brutal games to face censor

[93.5.] = Teen nod to violent action

[93.6.] = Should violence in video games be censored?

[93.7.] = Grisly game defies probe

[93.8.] = Video game crackdown

[93.9.] = Rules agreed to cut video game violence

[93.10.] = Lots of blood adds up to fun

[93.11.] = Game over

[94.1.] = Video games crackdown

[94.2.] = Youngsters hit back at critics

[94.3.] = Teens seek blood and guts

[94.4.] = 400 games miss video crackdown

[94.5.] = Victoria to ban R-rated games

[94.6.] = What young people are saying

[95.1.] = Study on video games

[96.1.] = Angry film worse than video game

[96.2.] = Competition not killing

[96.3.] = Probe on video violence

[96.4.] Films crackdown backed

[96.5.] = Experts split on censorship

[96.6.] = Move to ban violent games

[96.7.] = Video games alarm

[96.8.] = Teens toy with thrill of violence

[96.9.] = Mum is the word

For the period between 2001 and 2009:

[01.1.] = Computer games face `R' rating

[01.2.] = Harsh ratings likely for computer games

[01.3.] = BLAME PARENTS, NOT GAMES

[01.4.] = Sexual violence `way beyond' toughest rating

[02.1.] = `Desexed' game on sale again

[02.2.] = Armchair hooliganism

[03.1.] = Game cops a $350m writ

[03.2.] = Teens play deadly game

[04.1.] = Demand to ban thrill-kill game

[04.2.] = Kids locked in to PC violence

[04.3.] = Life-long agro links to electronic games

[05.1.] = Copycat fear on chainsaw game

[05.2.] = Game up

[05.3.] = Brawling begins over Bully game

[05.4.] = R-rated games review

[06.1.] = `Few people would look back at Pulp Fiction as horrific'; Numb to violence

[06.2.] = Bullying anger; Call to ban game

[06.3.] = Games of violence on the rise

[06.4.] = Computer game ban demand

[07.1.] = Video game guru slams violence

[07.2.] = Spot the gamer

[07.3.] = U-TURN ON VIOLENCE LINK

[08.1.] = Computer games to go adult

[08.2.] = Violent game sparks warning

[08.3.] = NO LONGER CHILD'S PLAY

[08.4.] = Censor call on slasher game

[08.5.] = Computer campaign; R-rated games bid

[09.1.] = Family groups outraged at gruesome game Violence overkill

[09.2.] = Family video games beat sports, action and violence

[09.3.] = Violence blocks Valve

[09.4.] = Game takes no prisoners

When using news media and a digital database, there are some weaknesses and limits to what can be done. When discussing the issue of using news media as the basis of deciding that a moral panic has occurred. Hunt (1997) notes Tester's criticism of the assumption that "simply because there was a moral panic in the media there must also have been a moral panic among the viewers and readers" (Tester 1994 cited Hunt 1997: 645). Hunt also presents Sumner's argument that news pieces are not a reliable guide to public opinion and that "it is quite conceivable that the public statements made by journalists, policemen, and politicians did not

have much impact on the public at large" (Sumner 1981 cited Hunt 1997: 645). McRobbie and Thornton however, offer a counter point:

> "The media is no longer something separable from society. Social reality is experienced through language, communication and imagery. Social meanings and social differences are inextricably tied up with representation." (McRobbie and Thornton 1995: 570)

Even "most political strategies *are* media strategies" (1995: 571, emphasis original): reality is constituted through the media landscape. This is especially the case for media in the 21st century, where the aspects that support McRobbie and Thornton's argument are amplified by the internet.

That digital databases have been used is problematic for two main reasons – validity and reliability (Deacon et al 2007: 133). They point to aspects of each that must be considered in any analysis using digital archives. When looking for 'themes' rather than a particular phrase, it can be very hard to make sure you get every article that has to do with that theme (2007: 133) – however this research is based on only using articles that expressly use the terms indicated, and care was taken to try alternate spellings and to search for other common factors revealed after the initial search. They also mention that it only provides linguistic information that is also given without context (2007: 134). However, this study observes only dominant trends in the written discourse, and it is acknowledged that this is necessarily a partial perspective.

The next two chapters deal specifically with the case studies of the periods between 1992 and 1996 and between 2001 and 2009.

Case Study of period between 1992 and 1996

This chapter looks at key themes in the discourse surrounding video games and violence in the newspaper reporting of the *Herald Sun* in the period between 1992 and 1996. It contains an analysis of how computer games, gamers and violence are constructed in the newspaper's reporting and an analysis of how that construction affected how the moral panic surrounding violent video games came about. The conception of moral panic that emerges from this is the model advocated by Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2002), wherein moral panics can be indicated by a selection of criteria: concern, hostility, consensus, disproportionality and volatility. Through the themes of 'Violence link', 'Treatment of R-rating', 'The actions of government officials' and 'Computer game proponents', considered within the framework of how the moral panic is constituted, the discursive construction of games and game players will be revealed

First, in line with Goode and Ben-Yehuda's five criteria the moral panics in this period are *volatile* (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2002: 38). A look at the list of articles about violence in games, which were searched for between 1992 and 1997, show that the concerns of violence in video games was raised suddenly at the end of 1992 and just as suddenly disappeared in the middle of 1994. A slight resurgence in concern occurs in the middle of 1996 but has exhausted itself at the end of that year, with no further mentions in 1997.

'Violence link'

Another of Goode and Ben-Yehuda's criteria is that there must be "a heightened level of concern" (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2002: 33), which must be manifested in a concrete way. In

this case, it is through the news coverage of the *Herald Sun*. In this coverage the concern is over the topic for which the articles were selected: violence in video games. In particular this concern manifests itself over the possibility of a link between violence and video games.

In this period there are a large number of claims about the connection between violence in computer games and violent behaviour. Leading psychologists claim that "children who play home video games have an increased tendency to use violence" [93.1.1] and PhD students offer up evidence that "Teenagers become more aggressive after playing violent video and computer games ... computer games encouraged teenagers to believe violence solved problems" [96.7.1,2]. Statements by 'experts' like this, aid in the construction of violent video games as potentially dangerous in their effect on children and youth, it also focuses the discourses of *who* players are, in these cases, players are constructed as children and teenagers.

'Moral entrepreneurs' also feed into the 'cycle' of concern with statements like this one from the Australian National Council of Women, who claim in regard to violent video games that: "these games ... do add to the gradual desensitisation of war, torture, bloodshed and demeaning images of women ... Children are already exposed to enough violence" [93.61], and the National Working Party for the Portrayal of Women draws attention to a game that had already been released for children overseas that contains "women in their underwear being tortured" [93.2.2]. These examples, focusing on games as played by children, and largely ignoring the possibility of adults playing these games, construct computer games as being the playthings of children, and gamers themselves as being children.

By concentrating on negative portrayals of games, described with shocking imagery of torture, bloodshed and linked with the sexual violence of nearly unclothed women being tortured, 'violent' games come to stand for the worst examples of the media. They also serve as an example of increased *hostility* to games, another of Goode and Ben-Yehuda's criteria (2002: 33). Something described so negatively presents them as something that, for some, have no redeeming features. This hostility is reinforced by the concerns with language like "The obsession of many young Australians with violent video games" [95.1.1], or a teenager declaring "My favourite game is Crime Patrol because it's so graphic, it uses real footage" [93.5.3]. Here the use of the word *obsession* has connotations of menace, of enjoyment taken to dangerous extremes, of *influence* on the behaviour of youth, The selection of the quote that uses the terms *graphic* and *real footage* implies that it is somehow similar to, say, news footage from a riot or some other police action, with the connotations that the violence on the screen is real in a way that a movie is not, and could thereby be regarded as having more impact on the teenaged players of games.

Hostility towards these games is also created by the way in which the news coverage, by way of its descriptions of games, constructs violent games as unsuitable for children, and so in need of control. Teenagers are described as "punching, kicking and choking" [93.10.2] their way through games; video games contain zombies that "hack the necks of screaming women" [93.7.1]; and games are described as having scenes of "chopping heads off, hearts being ripped out and blood spurting from gun wounds" [94.3.1] or "soldiers raping native American women" [94.1.12]. With descriptions sounding as if they were from the back of a horror movie tape, it appears that these games must have been quite realistic and at least widely available.

In line with Goode and Ben-Yehuda's expectation that a moral panic will exhibit signs of *disproportionality* (2002: 36), the descriptions of these games hardly match up to the reality. Especially when considering that a major concern in the senate reports on violent games was the game *Custer's Last Stand*, in which the rapes described above, occurred, which according to Lumby never existed in Australia, even after an extensive search (1997: 137). Another problematic game was *Night Trap*, which was misconstrued as full of sexualised violence – such as girls in underwear having their necks slashed – was in fact about saving people from a house under alien attack (Lumby 1997: 137), this was even acknowledged by an official in the media coverage: "[deputy chief censor] Haines says it wasn't that bad" [93.11.10]

Adding to the sense of concern about video game violence, anxieties are also presented as emerging from broad "community concern". The federal Attorney-General is "contacted by concerned constituents after the release of a number of new generation video games depicting violence against women" [93.3.3], new classification guidelines are "prompted by concern about growing violence and explicit sex on film and in video games" [94.4.8] and there is "widespread community concern about the impact of violent and aggressive computer games on young people" [95.1.4]. The repeated theme of 'community concern' implies that video games and violence, and the concern that surrounds the link between them, is more than just the domain of newspaper claims, and thus constructs that concern as something the reader should also be alarmed about. Video games violence is presented as a real problem.

That so many groups believe in the connection between video game violence and violent behaviour is indicative that there is *consensus* in this reporting on the veracity of such a connection, consensus being important to Goode and Ben-Yehuda's conception of moral panic (2002: 34). Psychologists, moral entrepreneurs, the community represented in the news

are all feeding into the representation of games as a menace. This consensus is reinforced by the actions of the government in answer to the concerns raised by those groups.

'The actions of government officials"

The government is represented as taking action against the danger of violent video games. The Law Reform Commission calls for "tough new controls to restrict the amount of violence in video games available to children." [92.1.1], this use of the word 'tough' in 'tough controls' points to connotations of being tough on crime, which is a staple of political media strategy; the government, in effect is capitalising on the panic in its own interests, feeding the 'wheel' of moral panic as described by Ferguson (2007) previously. The Senate Select Committee takes action – "a federal parliamentary inquiry investigating video game violence is preparing a report on possible censorship standards for video games" [93.4.2] – implying that the violence in games both exists and needs censoring. There is also a "report of the Senate community standards committee on the need for video game regulation is due to be tabled in Parliament" [93.8.3] while a Melbourne council "launched a campaign it hopes will see the national banning of all violent video games" [96.6.1]. This all implies that government action on the issue was important and legitimate in regard to the 'community concern' examined earlier. The government also makes statements about the "potential effect on children" [94.5.8]. This emphasises that this action is taken to protect children and that those concerns about the effect of games on children are legitimate. How the prospect of an R-rating was handled is another example of the government in action.

'Treatment of R-rating'

In contrast to the period between 2001 and 2009, which will be discussed shortly, an R-rating for video games is rarely considered in this period between 1992 and 1996. Most mentions of the R-rating are only in passing, used as part of a list of supposed classification categories as in [93.9] or as banned from arcade parlours as in [94.1]. The only article to engage in the possibility of an R-rating is 'Victoria to ban R-rated games' [94.5.headline]. The reason given by a spokeswoman for the Victorian Attorney-General is that it was due "to their interactive nature and potential effect on children" [94.5.8]. The banning of R-rated games from arcades, long the domain of children, and from the home computer game market of rated games indicates that in this period children are conceived as the primary audience for video games and that the primary concern is that children, as the main consumers of video games, might be able to access these R-rated games and be negatively affected by them. It also adds to a general consensus in the news texts that games have an 'effect on children'. There is, however, some resistance in this period to the consensus on the effect of computer game violence.

As well as demonstrating resistance, albeit futile, to concerns about video games, a more convincing argument as to the disproportionate response to violent video games, that can be added to the one made previously, is that there were several reports that acknowledged the connection between violent video games and violent behaviour as tenuous: "It is too early to make any link between violent behaviour and video games" [95.1.8]; "children playing video games were more interested in competition than deaths" [96.2.1]; and "violence in computer and arcade games had little effect on the players" [96.1.7]. However, the connection between violent games and behaviour is never seriously challenged in the coverage of the issue. This can be understood through the cycle that Ferguson (2008) describes, with the news media focusing on the reports that claim a controversial link, to the detriment of an understanding

that there exists just as convincing research arguing that no link between violent games and violent behaviour exists. This is one way in which the news media, chasing attention grabbing headlines, can contribute to the escalation of an issue into a moral panic. This, along with the previously mentioned example of politicians applying the same principle demonstrate the usefulness of Ferguson's conception of how moral panics can arise out of contributing actions that feed a cycle of intensification to explain moral panics.

'Proponents of computer games'

Most examples of defence against the idea of violent games influencing children come from teenagers, ranging in age from 13 to 18 [93.5, 93.10, 93.11, 94.2 and 94.6], who are approached by the newspaper and asked for their opinion on games being censored and the possible effects of violence in games on themselves and their peers. Their responses range from "I reckon the games take the aggression out of you" [93.5.6] to "I think it's silly – they are just video games" [94.2.3] and "If people can't tell the difference between games and real life there's something wrong with them in the beginning" [94.2.8]. However, that the majority of those defending video games are teenagers helps to construct games as a primarily youthful activity, and players as young people.

These themes reveal the ways in which games and gamers have been constructed in the news texts of the period, as well as how the news coverage can be understood in terms of moral panic. The period studied in the early 1990s can be reasonably called a moral panic, each criteria of Goode and Ben-Yehuda's (2002) model of moral panic is accounted for. *Concerns* flow from interest groups, the government, the media and the community. There is *consensus*, each of the groups just mentioned accept the validity of those concerns. The

coverage exhibits *hostility* towards violent video games, with vitriolic language used to describe them. *Disproportionality* is evidenced by, among other examples, extensive concerns being raised over a game that as far as anyone can tell, never existed in Australia. Finally the *volatility* of the moral panics in this period is substantiated by their abrupt appearance and disappearance. Implicit in these texts are the ideas that violent games exist and are a potential influence on people's behaviour, especially young people. Since games are constructed as predominately played by children, it is presented as *right* that the government is taking action, since it is only right to protect children who are not mature enough to make their own decisions in matters such as this. Given that games are conceived as entertainment for youth, this is seen to legitimise restrictive measures applied to the entire media. This is presented as due to a broad 'community concern' over the issue of violent computer games. Finally, that games were constructed as the entertainment of children and youth, and that gamers, who would be 'affected' by the violence of those games were children and youth, this discursive construction would have contributed to the ability of the moral panic to form, due to already existing ideologies that inform the necessity to protect children. Now that the concerns of this period of the 1990s have been demonstrated to be indicative of a moral panic, the next chapter shall consider the period between 2001 and 2009 to determine what type of moral panic, if any, occurred.

Case study of period between 2001 and 2009

The period of coverage ranging from 2001 to 2009 is examined here to be compared to that of the early 1990s which was examined in the previous chapter. In this chapter it will be demonstrated that there are similar concerns over violence in this period to those in the 1990s. However, rather than the more traditional model of Goode and Ben-Yehuda's (2002) moral panic, there exists a series of 'daily' episodes that fail to become full blown moral panics implied in the work of McRobbie and Thornton (1995). This will be shown to have occurred at least partially due to the growing role of lobbying groups that mobilise to defend games. It will also be suggested that a shift in the discourses surrounding games, gamers and violence has also contributed to this failure to mobilise a moral panic. Once again the themes of 'violence link', 'R-rating', 'actions of government officials' and 'computer game proponents' have been examined to reveal the discourses surrounding games and gamers.

That there is a presence of some 'moral panic style' language, but this fails to gain momentum of a full blown moral panic. This can be seen in the many examples of calls for bans of games that happen nearly every year [01.4, 02.2, 03.2, 04.1, 05.3, 06.2, 08.4, and 09.1]. As shown below, these are based on a sense of concern as per Goode and Ben-Yehuda's conception. However, despite this concern – and the rapid-fire rate of the articulation of this concern being somewhat a sign of volatility – no moral panic eventuates. The coverage of this period fails three key criteria of Goode and Ben-Yehuda's model of moral panic. As shown below, this period is marked by a lack of consensus due to the proliferation of lobbying groups that rally to defend video games. Apart from a small number of cases, this period is also marked by a lack of hostility towards games in comparison to the early 1990s period: the vitriolic language of that period is not repeated in the coverage of the

21st century. Finally the response to violent video game appears proportional, as opposed to the *disproportionality* required to constitute a clear moral panic.

'Violence Link'

As in the period 1992 – 1996, some claims are made of a causal link between game violence and violent behaviour, especially for children [02.2.20, 03.2.17, 18, 04.1.5, 04.3.1]. Sometimes this can extend to affecting adults [09.1.7]. Examples of claims of a causal link between real life violence and that of video games include: "Craig Anderson, Professor of Psychology at Iowa State University, said playing violent video games caused an increase in the likelihood of aggression and violence in children" [04.3.5] and "Overseas studies have established a direct link between violent video games and aggressive behaviour in children" [05.3.10] and "Many studies and concluded that people who play violent video games are more aggressive, more likely to commit violent crimes and less likely to help others" [06.1.2]. All of these statements assume that violent games exist and that they can have an effect on behaviour.

However, overall in the reporting of this period, there is some equivocation about the link between violence and games. Use of modality in a sense of lower commitment to statements is common. Examples include the use of 'can' in "Violence on television and in computer games can turn well-behaved children into aggressive bullies, according to latest research" [05.2.1] and 'some' in "We have clear evidence that violence in the media does affect some children" [02.2.20]. Other examples include the reporting on the "perverse" Rule of Rose game, where Bill Muehlenberg, spokesman for the Australian Family Council says, "It *could* push some children over the edge, while desensitising others to violence" [06.4.5 emphasis

added] and Attorney-General of South Australian Michael Atkinson who says, "Games *may* pose a far greater problem than other media" [08.3.22 emphasis added]. There is also the Australian Family Association whose spokeswoman Angela Conway "said such severe violence *could* affect the players behaviour more than violent films" [08.2.7 emphasis added]. This suggests that a causal link between games and violence cannot be clearly substantiated especially when the reporting has many examples of outright uncertainty over or rejections of the idea of such a link. For example: "The State Government considers the recommendations ... that more studies need to be carried out [on violence link]" [01.2.5], and "Most scientific studies have failed to show clear links between games and violence" [03.1.5]. There is also "U-turn on violence link" where it is claimed that "players are influenced more by their temperament and how they're feeling before playing the game" [07.3.1] than by the content of the game itself.

So overall the link between violence and video games is not seen in this period as something incontestable and this reporting is somewhat paralleled by reporting that considers gamers not only as vulnerable children who are easily influenced as in the 1990s, but also as adults who are consumers of legitimate entertainment. Some warn of the risk to children, such as South Australian Attorney-General Atkinson who is "concerned about the harm of high-impact, particularly violent computer games to children" [08.3.21], and "child psychologist Dr Janet Hall slammed violent games for their detrimental effect on children" [01.2.17], as well as the other examples above. However the discourse of this period also constructs gamers as adults. One article claims that "average gamers are in their 30s and are just as likely to be women" [07.2.2]. Also, articles about game violence might discuss "video game enthusiasts" [08.2.1] and "players" without differentiating them on the basis of age [08.4.2/11]. There are also presuppositions in articles construct a particular view of gamers, for example: "Many local

games fans are incensed that Australian consumers will receive a watered-down version of the game. Why, they ask, is it OK to watch R-rated films such as Aussie horror flick Wolf Creek, but not play a game with equally violent content?" [08.3.31/32]. In this example, gamers are positioned as adult consumers who are legally able to watch R-rated films and buy games in their own right. In these articles, gamers are framed as adult consumers whose choices are being restricted unfairly. As well as this, to add strength to the notion that gamers are mostly adult, the piece previously had mentioned that the average age of a gamer was 28, that 70 per cent are aged over 18 and that in five years time the average age will be 42 [08.3.25/26].

While there are concerns, reluctance to continue to claim for video games a causal relationship to violence and the declining emphasis on the risks of video games to 'vulnerable' children highlights the increasing construction of video games as legitimate entertainment for adult consumers capable of making their own choices about the media they consume. This represents a discursive shift in the construction of video games from a child's pastime to adult entertainment which may legitimately contain adult content such as high levels of violence.

'Treatment of R-rating'

The R-rating possibility is mentioned nine times in the period under study. This is a significant difference to the reporting in the period between 1992 and 1996. There are a couple of examples with negative connotations: "Computer games face R-rating" [1.1.headline] (which comes across as a threat or someone facing sentencing in a court of law) and "Harsh ratings likely for computer games" [1.2.headline] (which implies draconian

measures against some games are needed). On the whole, however, the news coverage of this period reflects a sense of gamers as adults with headlines like: "R-rated games review" [05.4.headline]; "Computer games to go adult" [08.1.headline]; and "Computer campaign; R-rated games bid" [08.5.headline]. The word 'bid' in the latter case can have positive connotations of a bid for success. The large piece "No longer child's play" focuses on Victorian Attorney-General Rob Hulls, who wishes to see the introduction of an R-rating [08.36]. This coverage shows that during the first decade of the twenty first century the possibility of an R-rating is portrayed differently to the 1990s where the R-rating is hardly mentioned at all. This represents an overall shift in the understanding of gamers from children in need of protection to adult consumers legitimately able to enjoy R-rated material.

'The actions of government officials'

One important factor is how the government is portrayed in these articles. At no point does the government in power during this period call for bans or censorship. Various expected government bodies comment on the issue of violence in video games, most frequently the Office of Film and Literature Classification six times and the Attorney-General of Victoria Rob Hulls four times. Others have commented on singular occasions such as the Premier of Victoria [01.2.7], State Youth Affairs Minister Jacinta Allan [05.3.5], a government spokeswoman [04.2.23] and once the newspaper credited 'the state government' [08.5.3].

For those singular occasions, the government never said anything in support of the notion that computer games are dangerous. Spokespeople respond indirectly to the question of video game violence. For example in 'Kids locked in to PC violence' [04.2.headline], the government is largely unconcerned that children are being 'locked in' to play violent video

games, but rather that parents "exercise caution when leaving their children in the care of others and to make sure they are satisfied with the supervision arrangements" [04.2.24]. In another case, Victorian Youth Affairs Minister Jacinta Allan says that the government will, in response to questions about the pending release of the Bully game, "monitor the game's release and alert Victorian school if problems arise" [05.3.5]. No other comment on the game is offered. This presents a state government that does not see violence in games as an important issue that needs to be commented on unless asked for comment by a news organisation.

This is a large shift away from the way in which the government responded to community concerns in the previous period. By the 2000s the government does not see computer game violence as a serious problem so long as legislative requirements are met, perhaps since the protection of children is no longer as great a concern with a discursive shift in the construction of gamers as adults.

'Computer game proponents'

Another important change is the way that games are discussed is the presence of a defensive voice that responds to criticisms of violent video games. In the 1990s space was given to teenagers to defend their entertainment. In the 21st century, apart from a sole teenager [01.3. 11], there are now more lobby groups and the producers and publishers of games speaking in their own right and defending their products. Whereas only one publisher is given a voice in the 1990s, the 2000s has seen an increased opportunity for these organisations to have a voice. There have also been increased opportunities for lobbying groups that were completely absent from the news pieces from the 1990s. This can be seen as an example of McRobbie

and Thornton's assertion that the nature of moral panic has changed because in part because of the defence of 'folk devils' by lobby and interest groups (1995, p. 566).

Increased opportunities for developers and publishers of games are also a part of the changing demographics of gamers, who are now understood as adult consumers who can lobby in their own interests in the defence of violent games. For example Michael Ephraim, head of Sony Computer Entertainment in Australia explained that "older players were demanding more sophisticated and realistic games" and that "Fifty per cent of PlayStation 2 owners are over 30 years old" [01.2.13, 14]. Lobby groups also play a part in the changing discourse surrounding video games, such as in the cases of: "Interactive Entertainment Association of Australia CEO Ron Curry said Australians had a right to demand more adult-themed material in entertainment. Mr Curry said an R category for games was needed as the MA15+ disenfranchised older game players" [08.3.35, 36]. There is also an article about the Interactive Entertainment Association of Australia's (IEAA) campaign to "Introduce an R-rated classification... using research that says the average Australia gamer is aged 30" [08.5.1,2]. These articles contribute to the general discourse of video gamers as adults. These articles, by explicitly mentioning the fact of average age of computer game players being around 30, present a way of looking at games that is far removed from the province of teenagers and children. The use of the word sophisticated has connotations of legitimacy and the use of the word disenfranchisement has implications of a legal right being taken away, which is something to protest, and also drives the discourse surrounding gamers away from signifying children, whose rights in regards to selection of media are often denied. The analysis of this theme gives much force to the discourse of gamers as adults. Defences by children are mostly absent and there is a proliferation of defences by adults, representing the interests of other adults.

While there is some evidence of a heightened level of concern and some sense of volatility due to the extremely rapid change of focus, between games, the lack of evidence for the other necessary criteria indicative of moral panic, - consensus, hostility and disproportionality, - means that in this period, a moral panic based on the more traditional model of Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2002) has failed to eventuate. However, no other model of moral panic can be evidenced in the coverage of video game violence in this period. Whilst there are some hints of the more complex and nuanced moral panic model of McRobbie and Thornton (1995), like the presence of organisations and people available to present a voice in defence and favour of violent computer games, none of the episodes they contest has ever developed past an embryonic stage. This may be somewhat indicative of the success of lobbying groups in the contest to defend violent games from the predation of moral entrepreneurs. The reasons for this success could lie in the shifting discourses surrounding games, gamers and violence. In this period, there has been a clear shift in the discursive construction of games, gamers and game violence, from that of the 1990s period studied previously. This is the idea of games shifting from being a childish or youthful activity to being adult entertainment; gamers once presented as being solely young people, became mostly represented as adults, and violent games once constructed as a danger to children and youth became constructed as a legitimate entertainment for adults, who should have the freedom to choose such activities as playing violent video games. This discursive shift makes it more difficult to attack violent video games since, unlike the children of the previous period, there is no longer an impetus to protect vulnerable young people from simulated violence. It is these factors that I believe have prevented a moral panic from forming in the period between 2001 and 2009 on the issue of video game violence.

Conclusion

This project has concentrated on discovering the forms of moral panic that have taken place in regards to concerns over violence in video games. It has focused on these concerns as they have manifested in Australia, during the periods of the early 1990s and the 2000s. Laying the groundwork in a theoretical investigation into moral panic theory, this study makes the argument that the traditional model of moral panic developed by Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2002) is a worthy revision of earlier work on the concept, such as Cohen's (2002) original work, and the extensions made by Hall et al (1978). Along with this, it looks at how McRobbie and Thornton's (1995) revision of the moral panic concept might be useful as a way of approaching a changing media landscape such as that of the 21st century.

This project's own analysis of the period from 1992 to 1996 suggests that the concerns over video game violence in the 1990s manifested as moral panics, as evidenced by the coverage in the Herald Sun. These moral panics are an example of Goode and Ben-Yehuda's concept of moral panic, which relies on several criteria that are indicative of a moral panic. A discourse analysis of the newspaper coverage during that period also reveals that games, gamers and game violence are constructed in a particular fashion. In this period, games are constructed as primarily a youthful activity, gamers are principally conceived as children and teenagers and violence in games are seen as dangerous, and as a threat to the children and youths that play games. It is suggested that these particular constructions of games, gamers and violence in games aid in the ease with which it was possible to utilise a moral panic surrounding computer games, due to tendencies to believe in the malleability of children's minds and to allow restriction to the behaviour of young people. Another argument made, is that Ferguson's (2008) concept of academics, the news media and politicians each feeding

into a 'wheel' of moral panic intensification, is useful when examining a moral panic that is based on a concept, such as violence in video games that might have a body of research behind it, and concerned parties willing to utilise that to their own benefit.

The analysis of the period from 2001 to 2009, it is argued, revealed that a traditional moral panic failed to eventuate, even though there is evidence of concern over video game violence. Goode and Ben-Yehuda's (2002) criteria are not met in this period, so some other conception of moral panic would have to be utilised if the concerns over violence in games is argued to constitute a moral panic. McRobbie and Thornton's (1995) model of moral panic, seems a good fit, except that while the period does exhibit a proliferation of defensive voices when compared to the previous period, these voices seem to have been too effective. So while in the author's personal experience, people have used the term 'moral panic' to describe calls for bans and censorship in the period of the 2000s, none of those episodes has ever amounted to any more than that first call. It is argued that this is not just because those that lobby in defence of violent games have become too effective, but also because of the discursive shift in the construction of games, player identities and violence in games. This shift has resulted in them moving from primarily related to youth to becoming more adult orientated. The period of the 2000s, sees gamers increasingly conceived as adults, games as adult entertainment, and game violence a legitimate choice in entertainment for adults. This, it is argued, makes it harder to drum up support for the persecution of violence in games that is required to develop a moral panic.

As far as it is known, this is the only study into the shape of Australian moral panics over the concerns about game violence and its possible effects on people. For both periods' studies a model of moral panic that best fits has been applied. This study has also utilised concepts

relating to the analysis of video game moral panics such as those of Ferguson (2008) and Sternheimer (2007), which are focused on the United States perspective and successfully applied them to a similar situation in Australia. This study has also sought to apply discourse analysis to moral panics to help explain particular features or differences in the news coverage of the two periods. These efforts are the contributions that this thesis has attempted to make.

Further research might focus on what fears and anxieties lay at the centre of these panics over the violence in computer games. While this study has suggested that there are general ideas about the necessity of controling the media habits of youth, it has not in any way investigated what those ideas actually constitute. Another avenue for further study, is how games are storied in media coverage, how games are themselves discursively constructed from the descriptions given in the news articles, and how close those constructions really are to the reality of the game. Perhaps, further research might consider looking at these moral panic issues on a larger scale. Using all major metropolitan newspapers and the national broadsheets, and bypassing digital databases to work from the hard copies, preserving all the context of headline size, format and accompanying pictures, would offer a fuller picture of how concerns over violence in computer games turned, or failed to turn in to moral panics could be drawn. It would be a hearty validation of this work, if this hypothetical study confirmed that the arguments made here are basically valid even when many broader factors are taken into account. If that were so, then the goals of this research to take a microcosm of the representation of these panics and then build a replicable account of them would have been achieved.

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